DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 286 367 FL 016 912

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TITLE What Variability Can Reveal: Translating into the Foreign Language.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (21st, Westende, Belgium, April 12-14, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Objectives; *Dutch; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Individual Differences; Interpreters; *Language Processing; Language Tests; Performance Factors; Postsecondary Education; Research Design; Second Language Instruction; *Translation; Word Frequency
IDENTIFIERS Error Correction (Language); *Modals (Verbs)

ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to determine the feasibility of research on individual variation in translation performance. Three translations produced by 20 students in their second year of an advanced English translation program at the Dutch State School of Translation, were analyzed for variability in the translation of Dutch modal verbs. It was proposed that the student's ability to resolve the difficulties of translating those forms would be a good predictor of his or her overall performance. It was found that while students do vary in their ability to produce acceptable translations, there are also many other factors that may interfere with analysis, such as differences in context, frequency of modal occurrence in texts, and the presence of other translation problems. Further research on the quantification of variability is recommended, and a heuristic rather than prescriptive approach to translation instruction is also proposed. (MSE)

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WHAT VARIABILITY CAN REVEAL.

Translating into the foreign language.

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At the Dutch State School of Translation I am concerned with training prospective translators, and a major part of my job consists in training them to translate into a foreign language, in their case, English. The end objectives of the four-year course do not require graduating students to have acquired a virtual native speaker competence in their foreign language translations — that would be quite unrealistic. Rather, we aim to train the students to produce translations that are grammatically and lexically correct and to a standard of lexical choice, register and style that, without many modifications on the part of a native speaker, would be able to be published. This brief summary of the foreign language objectives indicates both the desired high standard we would like to achieve and the vagueness with which it has to be expressed. It is in fact a constant source of concern that we do not have clear precise objectives expressed in such a way that lecturers, students, and the outside world could say that a student successfully completing any particular year of the course is able to complete satisfactorily a list of specified tasks. In other words, what we are looking for is a set of graded objectives for foreign language translation that would provide us with clear guidelines for training and for progress evaluation.

Two questions immediately spring to mind at this point. Firstly, is it feasible to break down the translating process into a set of rational task-segments which may be tackled in logical sequence, wherein each segment is based on the preceding segments? If segmentation were possible, it would imply that a flow diagram could be drawn illustrating the translating process in such detail that the training, and ultimately the methodology, could be programmed precisely for all stages of the course, to the extent of computer-ising extensive parts of the training process.

The second question is whether, assuming segmentation is possible, such careful programming is pragmatically viable, and useful or feasible on pedagogical and economic grounds. This, in turn, poses the question as to whether a sequential programming of the translation process mirrors what in

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fact really "goes on" when a translator translates. If the process can be broken down, and a careful structuring designed, would this really help the training or may it in fact slow down the students' progress or indeed lead to regression?

VARIATION

There is abundant evidence in students' work of the vast range of variation in the translations they produce. Some of the variants may be alternatives acceptable to the native speaker, some not, and some indeed, even though unacceptable, may not be counted against the student at a particular stage in the course, thus ignored. The variability is present not only horizontally, that is present in the work of students producing the same translation at the same time, but also vertically, that is in the work of the same student across a number of texts at different times.

Individual variability may be tremendously motivating or de-motivating for the student. Thus if the studnets, who for much of the time look first at their marks, find that these are varying so much each time there is a test, they may well wonder if they are making any progress at all. Similarly there are some students whose marks are roughly constant all the time: they too may believe that they are not progressing at all.

Despite our usual practice of reasonably detailed discussion of translations, based on the students' own production rather than a sample fair copy translation, it is in fact rare that we can convince the students of any real progress. This is of course in part due to the concentration of the discussion on those parts of a student's work where improvements can be made: in simple terms, we concentrate on what is wrong, rather than on what is right. This is only natural in that we would like to help students improve, but the guidance process itself could turn out to be just as de-motivating as any lowish mark given may be. It may be appropriate to misquote Sir Immanuel Jakobovits' paradox: "Nothing is greater in student progress than the refusal to believe in it."

Is there then anything which can be done to identify the trend of progress in the students' work, which could present the more positive aspects of their performance?

VARIABILITY ANALYSIS

For more than a decade, the study of the interlanguage variability of language learners has been an important field of research in Second Language Acquisition studies, (see Ellis, 1985). Tools devised by sociolinguists in their studies of first language variability, (for example, Labov's variable rules (1966, 1970), and DeCamp's implicational scales (1971, 1973)), have proved useful to a number of SLA researchers (eg. Dickerson, 1975; Hyltenstam, 1977; Dittmar, 1980). In a recent paper (Wilkinson, 1986), I suggested that such analytical tools may be appropriate to translation variability analysis as well. Subsequently I have embarked on a limited piece of research to see whether it would indeed be feasible to apply this type of analysis.

My hypothesis was that students would show performance variability in highly restricted translation problems areas, and that this variability would be quantifiable. Furthermore it would be possible to show how a student's performance in the restricted areas improved or declined over time. In this way, it was hoped that a method could be devised to provide positive feedback to counterbalance what may be seen as the sometimes negative impression given by the mark and by the number of underlinings, etc.

I chose the implicational scaling technique proposed by DeCamp as the analytical tool, basically on grounds of operational simplicity. In 1971, DeCamp introduced implicational analysis to linguistic data in his work on the post-creole continuum, and later in 1973 defined what implicational scales imply: "sets of hierarchical priorities for the control of variables, each set relevant to a certain area of the grammar". Initially as in Table 1(a), he argued that the emergence of a new item (eg. a new pronunciation) in the language of a speech

TABLE 1(a):

IMPLICATIONAL SCALE, WITH VARIATION
(after DeCamp, 1971)

	Rules			
Lects	A	B	C	D
1	+	+	+	+
2	+	+	+	V
3	+	+	V	V
4	+	V	V	-
5	V	V	-	-
6	V	-	-	-
7	-	-	-	-

TABLE 1(b):

IMPLICATIONAL SCALE, FREQUENCY TABLE
(after DeCamp,1973)

	Rules			
Lects	A	B	C	D
1	100	100	100	100
2	100	100	100	90
3	100	100	90	80
4	100	90	80	20
5	90	80	20	10
6	80	20	10	0
7	20	10	0	0

community occurred variably in relatively restricted environments and then would gradually spread to other environments until it would occur virtually all the time in all environments. Further refinements of the model have included the incorporation of frequency applications (Table 1(b)).

Although it was relatively simple to choose an analytical tool, and speculate how it could be applied, a real problem arose as to the selection of the problem areas where it could be applied. It is fairly straightforward to draw up a list of problem areas in translation into English; Table 2 below presents a selection of them.

TABLE 2:
SELECTION OF TYPICAL PROBLEM AREAS IN TRANSLATION FROM DUTCH INTO ENGLISH

1. Syntax	- Straightforward mapping - Marked theme/information focus - Adverbial placement - Pre-modification/post-modification in nominal groups - Existential structures - Translation of Dutch anaphoric pronominals - Impersonal structures
2. Verbal groups	- Conditionals - Present/perfective/past confusion - Reported speech - Modal verbs
3. Articles	
4. Singular/plural confusion and numerical concord	
5. Adjective/adverb confusion	

As it stands, this is, however, of little practical value for analytical purposes, since the occurrence of each feature is likely to differ significantly in different texts. Similarly, the closer you investigate each area, the greater the number of sub-areas revealed. Furthermore, in case of syntactic mapping for example, it is clear that, in addition to evident differences in intra-clausal word order between Dutch and English, (matters which are often dealt with in the 'grammar' component of courses and in which students can relatively easily achieve competence), there are as many sequencing options open to the trainee translators as there are to the native speaker in terms of thematic structure, information focus, emphasis, etc. The native speaker, albeit unconsciously,

varies the relative importance he gives to each of these discoursal factors according to a number of ethnographic features, (eg. addressee, audience, topic, setting, channel of communication, etc.; see Hymes, 1964), in an attempt to achieve the precise shade of meaning intended. Although the non-native speaker will, of course, do the same in his native language, he is frequently unaware how to achieve the same effect in the foreign language. Inter-clausal and inter-sentential features of discourse are naturally of vital importance when translating anything more than exceedingly short one sentence texts. The problem remains as to how one can isolate features and restrict them in such a way that a quantitative analysis is realisable.

I have not yet found a practical solution. As a small step on the way to this end, I decided to commence an investigation of the translation of Dutch modal verbs. These are among what I term "marker" features, in that the degree of difficulty posed in translating them marks them out as significant translation problems in any text. I go on to assume that if a student can resolve the difficulty posed with a high degree of frequency, then this will imply a corresponding high probability that the student will have been able to resolve satisfactorily most of the other difficulties in the text. It may be possible, in a very large piece of research covering many "marker" features, to place these features in an implicational order of frequency of acceptability, thus giving an overall profile of a student's attainment at a particular time. Hence, my reason for investigating the applicability of implicational scaling to translation problems.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

As a first stage of the investigation, the three translations produced under exam conditions in 1986-87 by 20 students in the second year of the course were selected as data. (Not all the students did the same translations.) Half the students had achieved very consistent marks (<10 point variance), and half whose marks showed wide variation (>20 point variance). The 20 students were selected more or less at random from the many potential candidates in the categories so that they covered the whole of the ability range in second year.

It quickly became apparent that the analysis I had hoped to make would not be very revealing. True enough, students do indeed vary in their ability to produce acceptable translations of the "marker" features, but many other factors come into play, which reduce the value and utility of the analytical study. The first and foremost is that the context of a "marker" feature varies so

considerably that it has not been possible to indicate whether a student is improving or not. Secondly, the number of occurrences is very small and the frequency varies considerably from text to text. This may be explained by the third reason: the texts selected for the translation tests have been chosen for different reasons and principally to test the students' ability in resolving different types of difficulty. This may partly account for the wide variation in many students' marks. Finally the students do not all translate in the same field: some have chosen to specialise in economics, others medicine. With these reservations in mind, the results I have obtained so far can only be seen as pointers to further research.

The three translation tests were administered in October and November, 1986, and January, 1987. Because of the short time span, and because of the limited number of occurrences of each feature, I have combined the results together as though one one test had been administered.

Table 3 presents the results for selected modal verbs: (on frequency grounds some modals have been omitted.) The number of occurrences was small (21), but

TABLE 3

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION OF MODAL VERBS

(infrequent modals excluded)

	Modal verbs					
Students	kunnen	zou kunnen	moeten	zou(den)	zullen	zou moeten
19	+	+	+	+	-	+
16	+	+	+			+
8	+	+	+			V
10	V	+	+	+	+	+
6	+	+	V			+
20	+	+	V	V	-	+
46	+	+	V	V	V	V
48	+	+	V	V	+	-
36	+	+	V	V	V	-
27	+	+	V	V	V	-
30	+	+	V	V	V	-
2	+	+	V	V	-	-
5	+	+	V	V	-	-
39	+	+	V	V	-	-
41	+	V	V			V
44	+	V	V			V
33	V	V	V			V
15	V	+	V	V	V	-
21	+	-	V	+	+	-
34	+	-	V	-	+	-

some very tentative conclusions can be drawn. It would seem that students have fewest problems with translating "kunnen", and most with "zou(den)" and "moeten", and even more so when these two modals are combined ("zou moeten"). A very tentative suggestion of an implicational scale for the order of difficulty presented by the selected Dutch modals is shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONAL SCALE INDICATING ORDER OF ACQUISITION OF ABILITY TO TRANSLATE DUTCH MODALS

	Modal verbs					
	kunnen	zou kunnen	moeten	zou(den)	zullen	zou moeten
1	+	+	+	+	+	+
2	+	+	+	+	+	V
3	+	+	V	V	V	V
4	+	+	V	V	V	-
5	+	+	V	V	-	-
6	+	V	V	-	-	-
7	V	V	V	-	-	-
8	V	V	-	-	-	-

Some sequential variation is likely and I hypothesise that continuing research would probably reveal a slightly different order:

kunnen zou kunnen zullen moeten zou(den) zou moeten

There may be grounds for this if one compares the number of potential interpretations of each modal. Table 5 is abstracted from the excellent discussion of the translation of Dutch modals in Hyams and Wekker's book, Translation through Grammar (1984). The wide range of meanings carried by "moeten" and "zou(den)" would evidently suggest that students would have more difficulty in translating them. "Zou moeten" may also be difficult, not because of a wide range of meanings, but because of the combination of "zou" and "moeten".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

These provisonal findings do not necessarily disprove my hypothesis. What they do suggest is the need for considerably more data in order to be able to quantify the variability and to indicate any trends. Equally the insufficiency of the data renders it pointless at this stage to attempt to correlate the frequency of successful resolutions of the "marker" features with the students' overall performance. The study is still continuing and I hope that the data

TABLE 5

SELECTED DUTCH MODALS: GLOSSES

(not exhaustive) (Hyams and Wekker, 1984)

kunnen	1. ability	1. can/be able to
	2. possibility	2. can/may
zou kunnen	1. tentative ability	would be able to
	2. tentative possibility	could/might
zullen	1. assumption or predictability	will/must
	2. willingness or insistence	shall/will
zou moeten	1. obligation	should/have to
	2. logical necessity	should
moeten	1. obligation or compulsion	must/have to
	2. moral obligation or duty	should/ought to
	3. (official) arrangement or agreement	be to
	4. report or rumour	be said to/it is reported
	5. logical necessity	must/should/ought to
zou(den)	1. unfulfilled intention	be going to/be to/about to
	2. in main clauses of conditional sentences	would (should)
	3. in conditional clauses	<past tense>
	4. polite requests	would (could)
	5. reported speech	would/should/<was> going to
	6. logical necessity	should/ought to
	7. report or rumour	be reported/said/alleged ...

from the students' final two tests of this year will start to reveal trends more clearly. It will also be necessary to investigate the frequency of successful translations of each of the different interpretations of the modal verbs (Table 5), since the ability to translate certain meanings may be more easily acquired than others.

The long-term aim of such a study is to provide insights into the effectiveness of the input. It is to be hoped that an analytical tool such as implicational scaling may reveal a suitable order in which to present discussion of particular problems to the students. This in turn may suggest potential changes in methodological approaches if certain "marker" features are not being mastered. Equally, it may well imply a need to develop a modular branching syllabus, so

that students could concentrate on those areas where they have particular difficulty, but ignore those where they do not.

Finally, to return to a point I made earlier concerning a carefully programmed training course. The presentation of grammatical and usage rules in context in a logically constructed sequence may lead to a regulatory quagmire for the students: perhaps what we require are not the neat prescriptive rules of many pedagogical grammar books, but rather sets of heuristics which, indicating the degrees of probability of acceptability, could enhance students' acceptable performance.

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